Semantic Gaps in Bilingual Urdu to English and English to Urdu Dictionaries

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ABSTRACT: *Bilingual dictionaries are quite popular among second language learners all over the world for a variety of reasons; the learners either consult these dictionaries to look for equivalents of the words that they wish to learn in the target language, or consult them when they face difficulty in comprehending the target language words while reading a TL text. Bilingual dictionaries often give this impression that there is an equivalent available in the target language for the words of the source language. However, this is far from reality. The so called equivalents provided for many words, particularly religious and culture specific words, in such dictionaries are not equivalents in the true sense and therefore pose problems for language users. Even if equivalents are available, the ones provided in some bilingual dictionaries are not true equivalents. In case of homonyms, for instance, only one meaning is translated, whereas the other meanings are simply ignored. Besides this, many equivalents that are provided carry huge semantic gaps. The paper is an attempt to explore the nature and degree of semantic gaps found in locally published Urdu to English and English to Urdu bilingual dictionaries. The analysis of the data gathered from such dictionaries reveals huge discrepancies in the meanings provided and the actual meanings the words carry. The results of the study pose questions for the translators and language learners in terms of the credibility of such bilingual dictionaries.*

1.0 Introduction:

Semantic gaps in bilingual dictionaries pose problems for language users who are not aware of the subtle distinctions in meaning. Bilingual dictionaries often ignore these nuances of language, which results in the failure to provide the users sufficient knowledge of the two linguistic systems. Instead of making the users aware of the possibility of conveying the same idea in the other language through substitutes, the bilingual dictionaries further widen the gaps in their knowledge of the two languages. Since no two languages have a one to one relationship the existence of exact equivalents for all the words is not possible. This is the reason that compiling a bilingual dictionary is a challenging task for the lexicographers who do not only have to be bilinguals but balanced bilinguals having equal knowledge of both the languages and their culture. Gouws and Prinsloo (153) state that "it is of extreme importance that the lexicographic treatment presented in a bilingual dictionary may not leave the translation equivalents isolated from their typical contexts."

Since the study aims at analyzing words presented in bilingual dictionaries, it is important to refer to the types of bilingual dictionaries. There are of two types of bilingual dictionaries: *active* and *passive*. *Active bilingual dictionaries* perform the function of encoding words while passive bilingual dictionaries deal with decoding of words. For an Urdu native speaker, an *Urdu to English dictionary* would be an example of an active bilingual dictionary, while *English to Urdu dictionary* would be an example of a passive bilingual dictionary. According to Gharaei (507) "active bilingual dictionaries are regarded as dictionaries for production and passive ones as dictionaries for comprehension."

Although learners find bilingual dictionaries user-friendly, the translation equivalents provided may at times be misleading for them. Instead of guiding the learners to use appropriate expressions, some bilingual dictionaries result in misguiding the users by presenting substitutes that carry huge semantic gaps. Here, it is important to differentiate between a semantic gap and a lexical gap. According to Bantivogli and Pianta (665): "A lexical gap occurs whenever a language expresses a concept with a lexical unit whereas the other language expresses the same concept with a free combination of words."

Dagut (1981) mentioned in Gaharaei (2012) believes that lexical gaps can further be divided into linguistic and referential gaps. A linguistic gap occurs when a referent is available in both the target and the source language, but is lexicalized in only one of the languages. Numerous examples of linguistic gaps are found in both Urdu and English with reference to the food items which are lexicalized in either of the two languages. One example is that of 'pudding'. Although pudding is a popular dessert in Pakistan, there is no Urdu substitute for it, as the word is not lexicalized in Urdu. In case of a referential gap, the speakers of one of the languages either source or target language know the given referent and their language has a word to refer to it, but the speakers of the other language have no familiarity with the referent and consequently their language has no word to refer to it. Here the word *'sohan halva'* (a famous sweet from Multan) can be cited as an example. Neither do the English speakers have any familiarity with the item, nor do they have any word in English to refer to it.

As far as semantic gaps are concerned, they appear in case where the substitutes provided in the source language fail to convey the meaning expressed in the target language because of wrong translation equivalents. The Urdu word *'qalb'* (heart) which is translated as 'mind' in **Kitabistan Urdu to English Dictionary** can be taken as an example of a semantic gap.

The task of providing translation equivalents may result in the emergence of certain idiosyncrasies or discrepancies to be more precise. Bantivogli and Pianta (664) classify them as: *syntactic divergences, lexicalization differences, divergences in connotation, and denotation differences*.

- *Syntactic divergences* arise when the translation equivalent does not have the same syntactic ordering properties of the source language word.

- *lexicalization differences* arise when the source and target languages lexicalize the same concept with a different kind of lexical unit (word, compound or collocation) or one of the two languages has no lexicalization for a concept (lexical unit vs. free combination of words). In the latter case we have a so-called lexical gap.
- *Divergences in connotation* result when the translation equivalent fails to reproduce all the nuances expressed by the source language word.

- *Denotation differences* emerge when the denotation of the source language word only partially overlaps the denotation of the TE. The TE of a source language exists but it is more general (generalization) or more specific (specification). In the former case the TE is a sort of cross-linguistic hypernym of the source language word and in the latter case it is a cross-linguistic hyponym.

1.1 **Research Questions:** The research aims to answer the following questions:

What kind of semantic gaps are found in Urdu to English and English to Urdu bilingual dictionaries?

How do lexicographers deal with culture-specific and religious specific vocabulary?

1.2 **Literature Review:**
A great deal of research, both qualitative and quantitative has been carried out on bilingual dictionaries to identify gaps at semantic and lexical level with respect to English and other languages. It is not possible to present an extensive literature review of all the studies in this paper, but an attempt has been made to include some of the relevant works in order to contextualize the current study.

A quantitative study using semi-automatic method was carried out by Bentivogli and Pianta (2000) to explore the nature of lexical gaps between English and Italian bilingual dictionaries. The results of the study based on contrastive analysis of English and Italian reveal that there are very few (less than 8%) lexical gaps between the two languages, which shows overlapping of the lexical structure of the two languages.

Mpofu (2001) conducted a study on English-Shona bilingual dictionaries to explore the problems lexicographers face while dealing with divergent languages and cultures. The Shona-English bilingual dictionaries, namely Hannan (1974) and Dale (1981) are the focus of Mpofu's research. The data of the study are restricted to culture-bound words and how the lexicographers have dealt with such words in the two dictionaries.

A study on bilingual passive dictionaries was carried out by Gharaei (2012) with the aim to study the issue of sense discrimination in such dictionaries from communicative perspective. The findings of her study reveal the need for employing more meaning discriminating strategies on the part of lexicographers.

With the aim to study the treatment of culture specific vocabulary items, Podolej (2009) explored English-Polish-English bilingual dictionaries. The study also aimed at establishing the most common techniques of rendering culture specific vocabulary items into the TL. The study is based on five bilingual English-Polish-English dictionaries. The analysis of the data revealed that the techniques for rendering such items into the TL depended first and foremost on the level of non-equivalence – items which lacked lexicalisation in the target culture were most often presented into the TL through definitions or explanations, without taking into consideration the culture they represented. It was also revealed through analysis that the English-Polish-English dictionaries made little use of their potential as transmitters of cultural information in their treatment of culture-specific items.

Ahmed and Iqbal (2010) conducted a study on Urdu-English dictionaries with the aim to explore the nature of verbal and pictorial illustrations. Their study was based on the data taken from six Urdu to English bilingual dictionaries. The results of the study prove that the illustrations provided in bilingual dictionaries are not effective in the sense that they lead to a great deal of confusion on the part of the users. The study ends with the recommendation for lexicographers to pay special attention to this area in order to enhance sense disambiguation.

The present study is different from the ones mentioned above. What makes it different is the fact that it explores the nature of semantic gaps in English to Urdu and Urdu to English bilingual dictionaries. Although both the languages belong to the Indo-European language family, one belongs to the Germanic group, the other belongs to the Indo-Iranian group and therefore have huge differences. The study is also unique in the sense that despite the availability of bilingual dictionaries based on local languages, not much research is done in the field of Lexicography in Pakistan.

1.**3 Methodology:**
An Urdu English bilingual who is familiar with the lexicon of the two languages can notice the semantic gaps that occur as a result of translating a word from one language to another. In order to explore the nature and the degree of such semantic gaps data have been collected from six locally published bilingual dictionaries: three Urdu to English (active) and three English to Urdu (passive) dictionaries. The reason for selecting six dictionaries is to provide rich data from multiple sources instead of taking examples from only one source.

1.4 Data Analysis:
The analysis of the data gathered from bilingual dictionaries indicates huge semantic gaps. However, the nature of semantic gaps varies. In order to perform a detailed analysis of the data, the examples are divided into different groups for thematic analysis.

1.4.1 Wrong substitutes: Some word entries provided in locally published bilingual dictionaries contain wrong translation equivalents, which result in the internalization of wrong concepts in the minds of learners. For example, the translation equivalents provided for the Urdu word *'jangju'* in **Ferozesons Urdu to English Dictionary** are: "contentious; litigious; quarrelsome; war-monger." All the translation equivalents provided in this bilingual dictionary carry negative connotations whereas the word 'jangju' is used in a positive sense and therefore it should be translated as 'warrior'. Same problem is found with the translation of some words in **Rehman's Urdu to English Dictionary,** *in which the word 'farmaaish' is translated as* 'order' *which is incorrect.* Another example from the same dictionary is the translation of the word *'dimaaGh'* as *'organ of smell'*. Although the correct translation equivalent 'brain' is given in the dictionary, the expression of 'organ of smell' is also provided along with it.

Similarly, in **Popular Oxford Compact English to Urdu Dictionary**, the word 'canteen' is translated as *'sharaabxaana and ta'aam xaana'* (bar and food outlet). Although the second meaning is acceptable, the first meaning is totally wrong. The word 'canteen' has more than one meaning, but none of the meanings refer to a bar. **Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English** lists three meanings of the word 'canteen': a place in a factory, school etc where meals are provided usually quite cheaply; a small container in which water or other drink is carried by soldiers, travelers etc; a set of knives, forks, and spoons in a box. Yet

another example is that of the word 'forward' which is treated as an adjective and is translated as "*gustaax, ziddi, xudsar*" in **Popular Oxford English to Urdu Dictionary.** None of these meanings match with the meanings the word 'forward' actually has in English. In **Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English**, the word 'forward' has four separate entries. It is presented as an adverb, as an adjective, as a verb and as a noun. The wrong input that bilingual dictionary users are exposed to leads to fossilization, which refers to the permanence of linguistic errors in learners' second language.

1.4.2 Ignorance of homonymous and polysemous relations: It is revealed through the data that there are many instances of words which are homonymous or polysemous and therefore more than one equivalent is required for such lexical units but this aspect is not incorporated for many such words in some bilingual dictionaries. For instance, in **Popular Oxford Practical Large Dictionary** (English to English to Urdu) only two meanings of the word 'commute' are mentioned: '*bhaari saza ko halki saza me~ badal dena*' (to lessen the intensity of the punishment); '*moaavza dena*' (to exchange one kind of payment for another), whereas the word 'commute' has another meaning 'to regularly travel a long distance to get to work'. The third meaning is not included in the list of meanings. Another example is that of the word 'loo', which in colloquial English refers to a toilet and is also used as a clipping of the word 'lanterloo', which is a card game. In **Rabia Practical Dictionary** (English to English and Urdu), only the second meaning of the word 'loo' is provided, whereas the most common meaning (a toilet) of the word is completely ignored.

In **Popular Oxford Compact Dictionary** (English to Urdu), the word 'shooting' is treated in a similar fashion. The meanings given for shooting in this bilingual dictionary include: *banduuqbaazi* (killing someone with gun) and *shikaar karna* (the sport of shooting animals and birds with gun). In addition to the two meanings provided in the bilingual dictionary, 'shooting' also means the process of taking photographs or making a film, meaning that is completely ignored in the bilingual dictionary under analysis.

1.4.3 Ignorance of contextual meaning: Some translation equivalents presented in bilingual dictionaries cannot be considered translation equivalents in all the contexts and it cannot be denied that a

lexicographer has to take care of the subtle differences in meaning of the lexical items translated from one language to another. What appears to be a translation equivalent in one context may not function as a translation equivalent in another context. While translating words from one language to another the contextual factors have to be considered. For example, in **Popular Oxford Practical Large Dictionary** (English to English and Urdu) the word 'hurdle' is translated as '*lakri ka jangla*' and in English it is explained as 'sticks woven together for enclosure'. This meaning of 'hurdle' is extremely limited, as it ignores the broader meaning of 'hurdle', which refers to any obstacle. The same negligence can be observed in case of translation equivalents of many words in **Popular Oxford English to Urdu Dictionary.** For instance, the word 'freebooter' is translated as *"samandari Daaku"* (pirate), whereas 'freebooter' is not just confined to this meaning alone. One of its meanings given in **Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English** is 'someone who joins in a war to steal other people's goods and money.'

1.4.4 Ignorance of denotative meaning: In **Popular Oxford Practical Large Dictionary**, the denotative meaning of the word 'noodle' is ignored; only the connotative meaning is provided. It is translated as *bevaquuf, saadah loh* and *ahmaq*, while the English substitutes provided are 'a blockhead' and 'simpleton'. Same holds true for the meaning of the word 'viper', which is translated as, *zaalim shaxs (cruel); Ghaddaar (treacherous); daGhabaaz aadmi (deceitful)* in **Popular Oxford Compact Dictionary** (English to Urdu**).** None of the Urdu substitutes provided in this dictionary gives the denotative meaning of 'viper', which is a venomous snake. It is true that 'viper' is also used for a person who is dangerous, malignant and treacherous, but the denotative meaning cannot be put aside.
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In **Rehman's Urdu to English Dictionary**, the word '*chuReil'* is translated as 'slut' which is the connotative rather than the denotative meaning of the word.

1.4.5 Ignorance of connotative meaning: Just as denotative meanings of some words are ignored in some bilingual dictionaries, connotative meanings are also missing in some of them. Take the example of the word 'owl' which symbolizes stupidity in the East and wisdom in the West. However, in some Urdu/English bilingual dictionaries, only the denotative meaning of the word is given.

1.4.6 Discrepancies in the degree of formality: Besides the semantic gaps, problems can also be noticed at stylistic level. The translation equivalents presented in bilingual dictionaries may be stylistically inappropriate. For example, the translation equivalent may either be extremely formal or informal to the point of being colloquial. In this case, the equivalent may fail to convey the true spirit of the word used in the source language. Consider the word 'guzaarish' for which one of the English substitutes provided in *Ferozesons Urdu to English Dictionary* is 'petition', which is a legal term and is therefore an inappropriate substitute. The given substitute is inappropriate for another reason because it conveys a meaning different from 'guzaarish'. A 'petition' is a written request which has to have signatures of a lot of people to make it forceful. Petition can function as a substitute of 'darxwaast' but not 'guzaarish'.

1.4.7 Cultural incompatibility: The translation equivalents for items specific to the culture of one language are the most difficult to find. Even if bilingual dictionaries provide substitutes for culture-specific items, the substitutes cannot be regarded as true equivalents, for the gaps in meaning can be observed. The best technique is to retain the culture-specific item, a technique that is not always employed in bilingual dictionaries, which results in semantic discrepancies. Some lexicographers translate culture specific items with the aim to provide translation equivalents, but they cannot be considered translation equivalents. Take the example of the word 'ghaagra' (a special style of clothing worn by women in the East) which is translated as 'petticoat' in *Kitaabistan Urdu to English Dictionary.* This substitute provided for 'ghaagra' is not its translation equivalent. Similarly in *Popular Oxford Practical Large Dictionary* (English to English and Urdu), the word 'pudding' is translated as '*muxtalif qism ka khaana ya pakvaan, egg*'. Both the meanings fail to tell the user what pudding means. In fact, the second meaning is misleading. It does not mean egg, but a dessert made with eggs, milk, sugar and flour, which is one of the forms of pudding. Pudding can also be made of a mixture of flour with meat or vegetables inside. Being a culture-specific word, 'pudding' does not have a proper translation equivalent in Urdu.

Another example of cultural incompatibility is evident in the Urdu substitute provided for 'sandwich' in *Rabia Practical Dictionary*, in which 'sandwich' is translated as 'do parti samosa'. The word 'samosa'

being another culture-specific word is bound to create confusion in the mind of a dictionary user as it is in no way connected to sandwich.

A translation equivalent, according to Gouws (195) "is a target language item, which can be used to substitute the source language item in a specific occurrence, depending on specific contextual and cotextual restrictions."

Gouws (2002) has categorized translation equivalents into 3 types depending on the degree of equivalence that exists between the target language and the source language items: *congruence* (full equivalence), *divergence* (partial equivalence), *and surrogate equivalence* (zero equivalence).

Where no equivalence exists, either the loan word is used to fill the lexical gap or the meaning is paraphrased, but if the meaning is not paraphrased carefully, the dictionary user may run the risk of internalizing a word with wrong semantic associations.

In case of a bilingual dictionary which presents a word with more than one equivalent in the source or the target language, it is quite possible that the equivalents may be only partially synonymous. It is the job of the lexicographer to warn the readers not to treat them as true synonyms. However, the lexicographers compiling Urdu to English or English to Urdu dictionaries do not provide any word of caution to the dictionary users. When dealing with culture-specific or religious specific lexical items, these lexicographers take refuge in surrogate or zero equivalents, which fail to convey the true essence of the meaning attached to such religious and culture specific vocabulary.

Conclusion and Recommendation:

The analysis of the data proves that there are huge discrepancies at lexical level in both Urdu to English and English to Urdu bilingual dictionaries. The way lexicographers deal with religious specific and culture-specific vocabulary is extremely misleading and puts the credibility of such dictionaries at stake. In most of these dictionaries even the year of publication is not given, which means they are inauthentic sources. Therefore dictionary users need to be extremely careful in selecting bilingual dictionaries. Unfortunately, many language learners are tempted to buy inauthentic bilingual dictionaries because of their low

price. What they fail to realize is that they waste their money and energy on using sources that are full of gaps of every kind, as the discrepancies are not just confined to lexical level alone. The bilingual dictionaries also abound in discrepancies at orthographic, phonological and morphological levels. Owing to the limited scope of the study, these discrepancies have not been explored in the current paper. However, a separate study can be carried out to explore the nature and degree of such discrepancies.

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